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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: Addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies

Statement submitted by Congregations of St. Joseph, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Introduction

This statement gathers insights emerging from work which Sisters of St. Joseph are doing around the globe with persons who are socially and economically excluded. The reports affirm the importance of universal access to the following basic benefits as a critical element in the creation of societies of fairness and inclusion: child and family benefits, maternity benefits and parental leave, unemployment support, education and skills-training, employment injury benefits, health protection and benefits in sickness as well as old-age, disability and survivors' benefits.

Social protection is not just good for individuals and families; it is good for nation-states and their economies. Exclusion from social protection means life-changing incidents such as sickness, job loss, low-wage jobs, injury or maternity can leave individuals and families so socially and economically excluded they are not able to recover. Social protection is also beneficial to the environment by avoiding the desperate circumstances which push communities into unsustainable and environmentally harmful patterns of extraction and production.

Purpose

Too often, the human right to social protection is undermined by competing economic, fiscal and political priorities. Reports submitted by Sisters of St. Joseph call for critical reflection and dialogue on how myopic government priorities can destabilize communities and stunt economic participation by marginalizing people from social protection. We call for government policies which recognize that investment in social protection is not a financial burden for governments but a mechanism for healthy social and economic development.

Context

From the 1940s through the 1960s, following the Great Depression and two World Wars, many of the advanced economies expressed their new-found sense of social solidarity through the emergence of the Welfare State. It was characterized by a new governmental emphasis on social protections such as unemployment benefits, child and family benefits, old age security and, in some places, medical benefits.

However, by 1980 a new international economic order had emerged, the so-called Washington Consensus. This approach focused on a market-driven approach to growth, emphasizing the reduction of public investment in social protection as well as reduced tax rates as mechanisms for maximizing economic growth. Due to this ideological shift, social protections were eroded as tax cuts, de-regulation and privatization were promoted in many advanced economies and Structural Adjustment Programs were imposed on many nation-states with developing economies.

Today, there is a growing sense across the globe that the current economic paradigm is no longer working for people or the planet. In many lower-income countries, weak social protections are bolstered only by remittances sent home from migrant workers, who are often exploited in their host country. In higher-income countries, real wage growth is slow, insecure work is becoming more prevalent, and local small business are choked out by trans-national corporations. The resulting high levels of inequality and socio-economic exclusion are contributing to a growing populism with racist overtones and ethnic intolerance.

Some governments and international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank are now emphasizing the importance of inclusive

growth. It is not enough for a nation's Gross Domestic Product to grow; the benefits of the economy must be shared equitably even as we care for the planet.

Key Patterns of Concern

Most people living in poverty are working; they just do not make enough money to meet their basic needs. Comprehensive and universal social protection programmes are necessary because the global economy is not providing workers and their families with a wage which gives access to the resources and opportunities needed to participate fully in society.

While strongly affirming the need for social protection for all, reports from Sisters of St. Joseph around the globe highlight concerns for particular groups encountering barriers to social protection:

Workers in Informal Employment

Workers in informal employment tend to be hit doubly hard. Not only do they lack sufficient income, they are also far more likely to lack sufficient social protection especially where benefits are connected to employment-based contributory schemes in formal employment. This policy structure reinforces economic and social exclusion.

People Accessing Social Assistance

Austerity measures lead to cuts the social assistance. These cuts destabilize individuals and families who are barely surviving. Parents are left to make impossible choices between feeding their children or paying the rent, finding informal work or caring for their young children, giving up their children or living in dangerous places, getting prescriptions for a sick family member or losing their home.

Migrants

While unique factors are at play when an individual or family decides to migrate, these decisions are also influenced by global factors such as a lack of decent work, environmental pressures related to climate change as well as war, violence and hunger. When the rights of migrants are respected, they often make significant contributions to the society and economy of their host country as well as their country of origin through remittances.

Most migrants have the documentation needed to live and work in the host country. However, a significant number do not, often due to the chaotic circumstances surrounding their decision to leave their home. Typically, official immigration status is a prerequisite for basic social services. This leaves too many people in dangerous circumstances, vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Indeed, even when migrant workers have official immigration status, they are often excluded from social protections in practice if not in policy.

Persons Encountering Gender-based Barriers

Reports from our members pointed to barriers faced by women in accessing social protection. For instance, women often have primary child care and household responsibilities which can lead to lower participation in the formal labour force and higher participation in informal work. Even in the formal labour force, women tend to earn less than men. Given that social benefits are often tied to employment-based contributions, this often disadvantages women in accessing social protection.

In addition, transgender and X-gender persons are often among the most marginalized when it comes to accessing social benefits like housing, medical care

and food security. Partly, this can be attributed to marginalization from the formal labour force but also to wider patterns of discrimination which contribute to homelessness, violence and exclusion from community-led supports.

Persons Encountering Race- and Ethnicity-based Barriers

Likewise, racialized and ethnically-marginalized persons also experience marginalization from the formal labour force. Moreover, discrimination and fear of racist violence or verbal abuse can impede access to information, social networks, services and support programs.

Persons with Disabilities

Many nations do not have benefits in place for disabled persons. In other nations, benefits exist but the disability assessment process creates barriers to accessing the benefits. Reports from our members point to numerous examples of struggles with bureaucracies which wear people down to the point of despair. In some cases, there is so little public awareness of available benefits that people with disabilities do not know the programs exist.

Persons with mental health and addictions disabilities often face discrimination when they try to access services or use facilities, encountering stigma, prejudicial attitudes and negative stereotyping. Persons with these disabilities often experience barriers to formal employment as well as reduced access to social protections. Furthermore, in times of austerity, cuts to health care often hit these areas of care more harshly than others.

Older persons

While many nations are making significant progress in ensuring that older persons receive a pension, these benefits often remain too low to remove older persons from poverty. In particular, women and workers in informal work are too often marginalized from protection because the pension is based in employment-contribution schemes. At the same time, where tax-financed and means-tested pensions exist, they are rarely sufficient to provide social and economic protection.

Long-term care for older persons is another critical area of concern. In many nations, older persons in need of such services do not have access. Moreover, where access exists, the quality of care is often sub-standard and the caregivers too few.

Persons in Rural Areas

Reports indicated that small rural communities tend to have less access to high-quality education, health care, transportation and communication infrastructure and even, in some cases, less access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Rural areas need policies for social protection which are attentive to their differences and respond to their needs.

Our Vision

The Congregations of the Sisters of St. Joseph recognize the profound ways in which the global economy shapes the world, impacting both people and planet. We lament the gaping divide between rich and poor; we condemn the recklessness with which the planet is used and abused as a tool for economic growth; we challenge the narrowness with which corporate and political leaders serve economic growth at all costs. We call for a new economic model which serves both people and the planet, redistributing wealth to create equitable outcomes for all people while respecting the life cycles and limits of the planet.

Strong social protection policies not only protect people from social and economic exclusion, they also boost healthy economic consumption and production as people buy necessities and participate in the social events. Investment in social protection should not be viewed as a financial burden for governments but a mechanism for healthy economic development.

Recommendations

• Concerning Social and Policy Development for Social Protection Benefits

Acknowledge the intersecting forms of violence and discrimination in society rooted gender bias, racism, ableism, homophobia, ageism and classism.

Include race, gender, sexual orientation, abled/disabled and class analyses in policy-making as well as program implementation and delivery to minimize barriers to access.

Conduct public awareness campaigns around issues of racism, gender oppression, ableism, poor-bashing, xenophobia and scapegoating.

• Concerning Implementation of Social Protection Policies

Expand tax-financed social protections and create portable benefits to guarantee benefits to workers in the informal economy and people excluded from formal labour market.

Ensure adequacy of social protection benefits to move persons out of poverty.

Universal social protections create stronger social cohesion and support for programmes. When social protection programs are targeted at those living in poverty, public support for the programs tends to erode and stigmatizing those who receive the benefits tends to increase. Over time funding for targeted benefits tends to become less adequate and the quality of the programs deteriorates.

Learn from social protection projects implemented by Civil Society groups (especially new models of delivering mental health care) and implement these models on a large scale.

Conclusion

Just as social protection is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), so too each nation can look to their disaggregated SDG achievement markers as helpful indicators of whether their social protection programs are sufficiently strong and comprehensive. Social protection measures should be viewed as key foundations for economic growth, not as competing interests to economic growth.